
OFFSHORE COALITION FOR ENERGY AND NATURE

MESSAGES ON MARINE SPATIAL PLANNING

To fully decarbonise the European energy system and reach EU climate targets for 2030 and beyond, offshore energy and related infrastructure development are imperative. Simultaneously, marine ecosystems need to be protected, as the pressures of traditional and new economic activities further increase impacts on already vulnerable marine environments.¹ An ecosystem-based², integrated planning approach is therefore needed to link renewable offshore energy production with nature protection and other existing activities at sea. If applied correctly, Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) can enable such integrated planning in marine areas and contribute to clarifying often conflicting interests and needs of marine users. MSP can further support decisions in allocating space to most needed and least environmentally detrimental activities and practices.

In this context, ocean basins should be treated as connected entities and not fragmented across projects and borders. Indeed, ecosystems stretch over national borders, impacts can affect entire sea basins. The added value of mitigation and compensation measures should thus be considered over the basin scale. At the same time, a cross border basin approach can also optimise the deployment and operation of renewable energy infrastructure and the associated electricity grid.

A holistic, ecosystem-based planning approach, as required by the MSP Directive, includes various sectors and interests. It needs to be embedded in line with the ecological carrying capacity of the seas and consider ecosystem components and their protection, the expected and emerging challenges posed by climate change impacts, the cumulative impacts of human activities on these components as well as governance and transparency issues. The guiding principle throughout the MSP process in the EU is to achieve good environmental status (GES)³ in our regional seas. The Offshore Coalition for Energy and Nature (OCEaN) is working towards understanding how these concepts can be applied and agreeing on their best available definition.

To support and enable timely and environmentally friendly development of offshore wind energy and connecting infrastructure, the members of the Offshore Coalition for Energy and Nature - OCEaN propose the following principles to be included by the European States in their respective national MSPs:

- 1) **MSPs should be planned holistically, at sea basin level and in collaboration across entire sea basins.** For the allocation of marine areas, MSPs must consider all activities within a sea basin. Regional, national, and international offshore strategies should be taken into account in the planning process. The [EU MSP Directive](#) and the legal obligations under the EU Nature Directives for 2030⁴ should be the

¹ [According to the European Environmental Agency \(2019\)](#), both traditional and emerging new activities will increase exponentially within European Seas in the next 40 years.

² In line with the [Marine Strategy Framework Directive \(MSFD\)](#) and the [HELCOM-VASAB Guideline on the implementation of the ecosystem-based approach in MSP](#).

³ In line with the MSFD.

⁴ These include the [Habitats Directive](#), [Birds Directive](#) and the [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#), together with the European Commission's (EC) [Offshore Renewable Energy Strategy \(ORE\)](#) and [Biodiversity Strategy](#).

foundation for the development of national MSPs. As sea basins act as one large interconnected system, transboundary cooperation is vital.

- 2) **MSPs should be based on the long-term and consider cumulative impacts at basin level.** Incorporating a long-term perspective enables planning reliability increases planning efficiency, optimises overall resource and spatial use and reduces impacts on nature. As changes in the marine environment may only be visible after a certain amount of time, long-term planning and long-term adaptive management are essential for ecosystem protection (e.g. MPAs, strictly protected areas). National MSPs should include sound cumulative impact assessments. Methodologies to assess cumulative impacts should be shared and applied at sea basin level and take into account ecological carrying capacities and site-specific species sensitivities. To do this, agreement has to be reached on how to operationalise these concepts. Data, necessary for assessing cumulative impacts, should be systematically collected and shared under open licences (see point 3).
- 3) **MSPs must be based on best-practice methodology and apply the best available data, tools, knowledge and practices.** Member States should reinforce and actively share national databases and test joint public-private monitoring programmes across borders. Data collection and sharing through standardised methods and protocols across sea basins is necessary for transboundary MSP cooperation. A common framework for data collection and sharing should be developed and adopted by, at least, all states sharing a sea basin. The common framework should foresee, enable and implement the sharing of all relevant data and the results of environmental and other relevant studies to be systematically published under a standardised open license.

Long-term data is key for conducting cumulative impact assessments and producing sensitivity maps. Sensitivity maps are a useful tool to inform and guide planning decisions.⁵ Member States and the EU Commission should facilitate and enable their production and mainstream their use.

- 4) **MSPs should be developed based on consultation processes⁶ and fair stakeholder engagement.** A fair and transparent involvement of all relevant stakeholders will enable governments and MSP planning authorities to better balance the needs of interest groups. Multi-stakeholder participation will increase understanding of potential challenges and solutions across sectors and borders and ultimately strengthen implementation. One core requisite is that all relevant MSP documents and supporting information are publicly available. Multi-stakeholder participation can further clarify the interactions of different human activities and their cumulative impacts, thus leading to open discussions about limiting most damaging practices.

⁵ Through sensitivity maps, the best-suited locations for nature protection and renewable energy infrastructure can be identified.

⁶ MSP consultation processes should be held in accordance with the principles laid out in the Aarhus Convention. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (1998) requires public authorities to make arrangements to enable the public affected and environmental non-governmental organisations to comment on proposals for projects affecting the environment, or plans and programmes relating to the environment, these comments to be taken into due account in decision-making, and information to be provided on the final decisions and the reasons for it. The full text can be found here: <https://unece.org/DAM/env/pp/documents/cep43e.pdf>

- 5) **Multiple use of marine areas⁷ should be considered as a tool to conciliate between conflicting interests.** For this reason, options of multi-use need to be explored and tested for their ability to solve spatial conflicts as well as their impacts on the environment. Marine protected areas (MPA) are generally highly sensitive and therefore unlikely to be suitable for any development. Wind farms and connecting electricity grids in MPAs are an exception and can only be developed under strict conditions. If and under what conditions needs to be carefully evaluated in a multi stakeholder process.

Multi-use should be done in accordance with environmental principles and following a sound cumulative impact assessment. MSPs must strategically prioritise activities in the contested marine space. Historical rights to ocean space should not be indefinite and must be reconsidered in the context of the need for renewable energy systems and ecosystem conservation. Pilot projects testing multi-functionality and multiple uses should be encouraged and supported, provided that all efforts have first been made to avoid and mitigate environmental damage through the mitigation hierarchy.

⁷ Multi-use denotes “the joint use of resources in close geographic proximity. This can involve either a single user or multiple users performing multiple uses. It is an umbrella term that covers a multitude of combinations of uses and represents a radical change from the concept of exclusive resource rights to the inclusive sharing of resources by one or more users.” Resources in this context is understood as “a good or service that represents a value to one or more users. Such resources can be biotic (e.g. fish stocks) or abiotic (e.g. ocean space) and can be exploited through direct (e.g. fishing) or indirect (e.g. nature conservation) uses.” (EU COM 2021)